

# THE IRISH TIMES

## Irish 'breeder' girls sent to Australia during Famine to be honoured

Artwork evokes 'story of bravery' behind 110 Skibbereen teenagers forced to flee

🕒 about 23 hours ago

Ailín Quinlan

On leaving their famine-ravaged home town, each girl received two dresses, two petticoats, five pairs of stockings, two pairs of shoes, a bible, a bowl and a spoon.

This summer, the poignant story of 110 teenage girls sent in 1848 from the devastation of a starving Skibbereen to Australia – where they were referred to as “breeders” – will be recalled in a bronze sculpture and a large piece of Australian sandstone in the West Cork town.

“This is a story of bravery, the bravery of women; it is a story of heroines,” says Skibbereen-based artist Toma McCullim. The girls from the Skibbereen Union Workhouse were despatched to Australia to provide labour, marry, have children and help colonise the sprawling continent.

It's uncertain how much choice, if any, they had in their departure, the artist says. At the time, 60 people a day were dying in the Skibbereen workhouse, which was rife with disease and hunger.

The 110 were essentially “farmed”, says the artist with Uillinn, the West Cork Arts Centre, who has been the driving force behind the year-long *110 Skibbereen Girls* public art project.

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The 110 girls departed for Australia under the Earl Grey Famine Orphan Scheme, named after the colonial secretary who enacted it

In documentation she studied as part of her research through residencies at Uillinn, West Cork Arts Centre in Skibbereen and at the site of Skibbereen Workhouse, now Skibbereen Community Hospital Campus, the girls were referred to as “breeders”.

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### Orphan scheme

The residencies allowed McCullim to carry out research and support a variety of tours, talks, film screenings and participatory workshops on the theme of the 110 girls and their journey to Australia.

Neisha  
Wratten at  
the Carrick-  
on-  
Shannon  
workhouse

from which  
her  
ancestor  
Bridget  
Cannon was  
taken to  
Australia in  
1849. File  
photograph:  
Brian  
Farrell

The 110 girls departed for Australia under the Earl Grey Famine Orphan Scheme, named after the colonial secretary who enacted it.

This scheme had two aims: to reduce overcrowding in Irish workhouses through an assisted emigration scheme; and to send female immigrants to settle in Australia where at the time there were nine men for every woman.

“

Many of them did better in Australia than they could have done in the prevailing condition in Ireland at the time

The board of guardians in every union in Ireland put forward the names of suitable girls aged 14-18. An estimated 4,000 girls left the country under the scheme. Skibbereen Workhouse offered the most girls outside Dublin. There are believed to be in the region of 10,000 descendants of the young Skibbereen emigrants.

### Descendants

Although the girls did not have to be orphans to be eligible for the scheme, it was stipulated that they were not to be living with their families, be of good character, unmarried and without children so that there would be no impediment to marrying Australian settlers.

“Many of them did better in Australia than they could have done in the prevailing conditions in Ireland at the time,” says McCullim.

At least two descendants are expected to make the journey to Skibbereen next month for a special ceremony honouring their ancestors' story.

One hundred and 10 bronze spoons have been cast by McCullim from beeswax moulds created by staff and residents at the Skibbereen Community Hospital complex, formerly the workhouse.

Throughout this month, the spoons will be embedded in the archway above what used to be the workhouse's Women's Entrance, near the site's famine burial ground.

This piece of public art, which will be unveiled by the Australian ambassador on July 20th, will also include an installation of a piece of Australian sandstone, donated by the Australian embassy, which is expected to be placed in front of the archway.

The ceremony will take place the day after the prestigious *Coming Home: Art and the Great Hunger* exhibition of historical and contemporary artwork from Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University in the US state of Connecticut, opens in Uillinn, the West Cork Arts Centre in Skibbereen.

*The exhibition is on display in Dublin Castle*

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## 'It was like landing on the moon': Finding the fate of Irish Famine orphans sent to Australia

A woman researching their fate tells us their story.

BY AOIFE BARRY | SUNDAY 18 JUN 2017, 6:00 PM | [HTTP://JRNL.IE/3448701](http://jrnl.ie/3448701)



A reenactment at the Famine Memorial in Dublin.

*Image: Leah Farrell/Photocall Ireland*

**FROM 1848 – 1850, hundreds of young girls aged between 14 and 18 were sent by boat from Ireland to Australia.**

**It was during the Famine, and they were orphans, or had no family to support them. Many of them had no siblings.**

They lived in workhouses.

Here in Ireland, their story isn't widely told, according to Barbara Barclay, who is researching what happened to the girls, and who their descendants are. But in Australia, she says, they are remembered, and there are even memorials to mark their impact on the colony.

Barclay is from Australia – with one set of great-grandparents from Ireland – and has lived in Ireland for 20 years. She first came across the story when she worked at Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney, where the girls were housed in the immigration depot after their arrival.

She originally looked at their stories for her fourth-year dissertation while carrying out her heritage studies degree in GMIT. The Mayo local now has a scholarship for a research masters so she can continue her work.

### **'They have thousands of descendants'**

In her research, Barclay is trying to find out the fate of the girls who left Mayo. There were 4114 girls who left Ireland overall, from 118 workhouses. Of these, 137 were from Mayo. They travelled on different ships, including The Panama, The Lady Kennaway, and Inchinnan.

"They have literally thousands of descendants," says Barclay of the girls. The descendant of one orphan told her that her relation alone had around 800 descendants in Australia.

"They are quite well known – they were mothers of colonial Australians. They are really forgotten about here [in Ireland] but the reason they are forgotten is the time and manner in which they left," says Barclay.

Once the girls got into the workhouse "there really wasn't a future for them to get out", says Barclay. Travelling to Australia gave them a chance to try and start afresh.

An Australian monument to the Great Irish Famine is located at Hyde Park Barracks, and includes a glass wall etched with the names of 400 of the girls, including 14 Mayo girls.



Source: [Will/Flickr/CC](#)

## The challenge

Because the girls and young women were orphans, many had few, if any family members to remember them.

“My challenge is to try and find where they came from and try and find family and extended family,” says Barclay, who thinks that at some point she may use DNA testing to connect the women with their descendants.

Understandably, people’s surnames are helping make connections – like the Gillard sisters, who were found to be related to a Frenchman who came to Mayo in 1798, fell in love with a local woman and stayed. Or Maria Lyons from Westport, who Barclay feels is probably related to some of the Lyons family members living in the town today.

Trying to find out more about the young women is “a challenge”, says Barclay. It certainly is, as primary documents are hard to find. But she has found out a lot about what they could expect on arrival.

“Some of the girls had a life they didn’t dream of,” she says. “But some ended

up on the streets, in prostitution, or jails. The majority did marry and had many, many children.”

The scheme was seen as a way of addressing the gender ratio imbalance in Australia, which was 70 years a colony by this stage. It was emerging from its penal colony past and the new middle-class were setting up life. They wanted domestic servants, and the girls from the workhouses were deemed to be suitable.

And so they were able to apply for this scheme, which would see them being given clothing, and their passage on the ships paid for. They were supervised during their three-month journey from Plymouth to Australia.

It was an assisted migration scheme that was different to the tragic coffin ships that travelled from Ireland to the USA, says Barclay – the death rate on these ships was less than 1%. And there were certain requirements for the girls who wanted to take part.

“Every now and then there are newspaper reports about them – they are a feisty bunch,” she says. “They survived a famine, they got themselves through the workhouse.”

She says their trip was really highly regulated, and the young girls were “minded start to finish”.

Barclay says they were taught skills on the ship. “It was a well-managed scheme with all the best intentions,” she says. “Not everything works out perfectly. It was nothing like the coffin ships. There was a parliamentary inquiry at the time and it was commented that the scheme had none of the problems seen on American passages.”

The fact that the trip was paid for by the Australian colony was why the British government agreed to take part, says Barclay.



A reenactment at the Famine Memorial in Dublin.

Source: Leah Farrell/Photocall Ireland

## Stereotypes

When they arrived at Australia, the girls went to Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide, with the Mayo girls in particular being sent to Sydney and Melbourne.

“When they arrived they were housed,” says Barclay. “They were put into an immigration depot, dormitory-style. They would have hiring days that were very relegated – they weren’t allowed to work in pubs. They were hired out with official agreements that had to be dealt with by the courts if there was a problem.”

News reports about court appearances related to those problems shed more light on the girls’ fates. These court reports often show the girls’ feistiness, says Barclay. “They might have been petty complaints but the girls knew their rights, if they weren’t treated properly they went to the court to sort it out. Or their employer might have taken them to court.”

She says that the fact the girls came from workhouses and were then sent to work for the burgeoning middle class itself might have led to issues. Their new bosses “were probably not used to having servants”, while the girls were paid decent wages but were effectively “thrown in the deep end” into a new world.

“They were Irish and they were Catholic and this was a very Protestant colony,” says Barclay. The girls no doubt heard stereotypes about “these are lazy Irish Catholics”.

“There was an Irish element in Australia,” says Barclay.

**“ There are other articles of employees defending the girls. So the general opinion was these girls weren’t considered to be very good and that’s why the scheme was ended because they felt there were too many coming out and not enough jobs.**

Barclay says that the majority of the women married, had children, and “worked really hard” all their lives. She says people in Australia are very proud if these young women were their descendents – an attitude that has changed over the decades.

### **Life on the moon**

But as much as moving to the Australian colonies represented a new life, it also meant moving to an at times harsh environment.

The difficulties they would have encountered included “the weather, different seasons, the temperatures, the bugs, the spiders ” says Barclay.

**“ Everything was different – it was like being sent to the moon, it was a just a completely different life.**

She has never heard of any of the girls getting to return home, although in Maria Lyons’ 1922 obituary it said that she was delighted that she had lived long enough to see the Irish Free State.



The fact that there are a lot of people in Australia researching their family history has helped Barclay, who makes contact with people through the website Ancestry.com. She also combs through birth, death and marriage records in Australia, and newspaper archives.

There are limited church records for this period in Ireland, with no birth, death and marriage records from the Famine times. So far, she's only been able to find a handful of townlands connected to the girls, because when they arrived in Australia they often gave their address as the workhouse. Most of the workhouse records have been lost or destroyed.

However, as the shipping records were "excellent" in Australia, these have been extremely helpful to Barclay.

"I'm trying to find the story of how it all worked, how it was actually done and then I'm trying to find the families and make connections between the descendants in Australia and where they came from in Ireland," says Barclay of her research.

"One [descendant] to visit last year and I didn't have any relatives, so that's where I might look at in the future," she says, adding that the popularity of 'genealogy tourism' in Australia means people are often looking to visit the land their ancestors came from.

A **memorial** was erected to the girls who left the workhouse in Ballyshannon, Co Donegal, thanks to the work of local historians, and Barclay would love to raise a memorial for the Mayo orphan girls, to commemorate what they went through.

*For more information, visit **Barbara Barclay's website**.*

**Read: Famine emigration stories: Corkman who made it to US went to war in exchange for land for his family**>



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## Some 4,000 Irish girls sent to Australia under orphan scheme

Descendants of orphans transported to Australia want memorial in Carrick-on-Shannon

© Wed, Aug 10, 2016, 01:00

Marese McDonagh

Bridget Cannon was just 15 when she was taken away from Carrick-on-Shannon workhouse in a horse and cart in February 1849.

Bridget's great-great-granddaughter Neisha Wratten has travelled from her home in Australia to campaign for a memorial at the former workhouse to all who left there during the Famine under the "Earl Grey orphan scheme".

Designed by the famous tea merchant's son to correct the gender imbalance caused by the transportation of convicts, the scheme was the reason Bridget was driven away that day in William Sweeney's cart on the first leg of a four-month journey. She was one of 4,000 Irish teenage girls taken to Australia under the scheme.

Having researched Bridget's life and the fate of other Earl Grey girls from Carrick, Wratten says one of the things that saddens her most was how little things have changed for immigrants to Australia in almost 170 years.

"I was distressed to learn that Bridget was detained in a penitentiary at Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney shortly after being indentured," said the Adelaide-based gynaecologist.

She discovered that 250 Earl Grey girls were detained for "general misconduct".

"They were kept apart from the other girls in case they contaminated them," she said. "They had to eat, sleep and work in one room where they were forced to pick oakum."

### Prejudice

The Irish faced the same kind of prejudice in Australia then "as people from Middle Eastern countries are facing today", she said. "Australia has learned nothing. It's time we grew up as a nation".

Wratten believes girls from Irish rural backgrounds were punished for being ill-suited to civilised society in Sydney where some were sent as serving girls. "They probably knew how to milk a cow and to wrestle a sheep or dig up a patch of potatoes, but did not have any idea how to polish the cutlery".

Three years ago during the Gathering, Wratten was one of 30 participants in the "Famine Attic Experience", spending a night in the workhouse attic where the children were accommodated. She believes many other Earl Grey descendants are keen to see the grey, stone-cut building that has barely altered since the Famine, and she believes restoration of the entire attic would be a fitting memorial to those who lived and died in the workhouse.

"When you go into that attic you grasp the scale of the tragedy. It's like hearing about the second World War and then visiting a camp and it hits you."

Wratten says now is a good time to plan a memorial at the former workhouse which currently houses St Patrick's community hospital, as a new hospital building has been approved.

### Pilgrimage

"The workhouse is intact, almost exactly as it was when Bridget was there," she said. "The platforms where the children slept on straw are still there in the attic."

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In Leitrim for two weeks, she is holding meetings with politicians, planners and other interested parties to discuss her proposal. John Bredin, chairman of the Heritage Group which has a long-term lease on part of the former workhouse, says he would welcome a memorial to the 65 teenage girls who left there during the Famine.

He expects more Earl Grey descendants to make a pilgrimage to the former workhouse and is planning another “Famine Attic Experience” for 2017.

### **The lucky ones**

“We have a lot of information for them – the names of the girls, their parents’ names and the names of their townlands,” he said.

But Bredin says there may well be logistical and cost issues given there are central heating pipes running through the attic. “We are very keen to meet Dr Wratten to discuss ways of commemorating these girls and we are very conscious that the famine is still happening all over the world.”

Bridget and the other girls who left between 1848 and 1850 were provided with a travel box containing, among other things, six shifts, two pairs of shoes, two wrappers, a flannel petticoat, a bonnet, two linen collars, a pair of stays, a Bible and a prayer book.

As 12 inmates were dying every week in the workhouse, those who left may have been regarded as the lucky ones.

“But they did not all have happy endings,” Wratten said. After 30 years of abuse her own ancestor eventually took her husband John Smith to court.

“In one incident she lost some teeth and had her ribs broken,” said Wratten. “But she finally said ‘enough’ when John threatened to put a pitchfork into her chest, and the court case made the state newspapers in Brisbane. We still have an enormous problem in Australia with domestic violence, which is another reason her story is so pertinent.”

A video link between the museum at Hyde Park Barracks and a memorial in the former workhouse in Carrick is part of Wratten’s dream.

“It is hard to convey just how much the descendants – and the Australian-Irish community – treasure these women. They are incredibly special to us. They are our little Irish mothers,” she said.

Local Fine Gael councillor Finola Armstrong McGuire supports the idea of a memorial. “Neisha is a living witness. This is part of our history but she makes it real.”

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